

A grand REVIVAL

The buzzing city of Beirut is back and it's more vibrant than ever, says *Franca Davenport*



Delicious food at Tawlet

If Beirut were a person, it would be one of those characters that can party until dawn, yet still remain cool, calm and collected. It is a city that is both urban and urbane and clearly knows how to pace itself, which is just as well considering how much it has to offer. A mere three days in this Middle Eastern capital can feel like a fortnight, and for all the right reasons.

As you fly into Beirut, the sight of its high-rise jostle along the Mediterranean coast can

seem slightly daunting but, as you walk around this city, you begin to discover its many depths. Like many capitals the traffic is terrible and, due to Beirut's troubled history, there is a large amount of construction but, despite this and the occasional tank on the street corner, there is a warm comfort to the place. Even as a stranger, it feels safer than parts of London and exudes an unpressured friendliness.

Not surprisingly, the evening starts late so it's worth having a large lunch. A great place is Tawlet, which is run alongside the new farmer's market and offers a fantastic buffet prepared by local cooks. Dishes include delicious meatballs, fragrant salads, beautiful stringy halloumi and the famous Lebanese kibbeh, which is a mix of bulgur wheat and mincemeat generally served cooked but, for the more adventurous, can be eaten raw.

Tawlet is set close to the Downtown area so afterwards you can head to the new 'souks'. During the war, Downtown was one of the worst hit areas and has been drastically rebuilt. Instead of the chaotic markets you might expect, the souks are now sculpted shopping arcades, brimming with designer labels and high street brands. It's definitely an experience, if not quite



the one you might have imagined.

Whatever time you decide to start the evening, there are plenty of bars and restaurants. The renowned dining area is Achrafieh. Here you can take your pick from traditional Lebanese to French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese and 'fusion' restaurants. And not far from here is the slightly funkier Gemmayzeh area, which is sprinkled with eateries. Both areas have a French architectural influence and, although they didn't suffer to the same degree as Downtown, there is plenty of rebuilding with new apartment blocks competing for space next to old balconied buildings with crumbling facades.

Having wine and dined, one of the best places for the middle part of the evening is the Music Hall. Set in a converted cinema, the cabaret style music theatre has maintained the plush red curtains, mirrored in grandeur by a huge bar. It features a mix of acts, singing everything from a Pink Floyd medley to traditional Lebanese music.

One of the best-known clubs is B018. Designed to mimic a bunker, there is little to see from the outside but, as you descend, you enter an epitome of post-war chic. Dark, stark and very cool, there are a number of quirky touches such as the coffin-like seats that flip down into dancing tables. The pièce de résistance is the retractable roof that opens periodically, lifting a large mirror to reflect the city's skyline to the revellers below. With such



RIGHT: Skiing in Faraya
BELOW: B018



ABOVE: The vibrant Albergo Hotel
LEFT: L'Hôte Libanais



party energy, it's difficult to imagine the club is on the site of a war-time massacre but this is something that makes Beirut so unique: its ability to pay subtle homage to its past and seamlessly join gravity with frivolity in the same place.

With such entertainment it's easy not to sleep, but it would be a shame to miss out on the fantastic places to stay. Probably the most spectacular in terms of elegance and character is the Albergo in Achrafieh. This stunning hotel has 33 rooms and suites, each with a unique

theme, giving it a sense of something very grand yet still understated. The small, glass lift is an experience in itself, as you watch each floor pass with its own collection of exquisite ornaments and furniture. The top floors have a swimming pool, a terrace and a rooftop restaurant from where you can watch the buzz of the city below.

For those who are looking to get a little further under the skin of Beirut, there is a new concept called L' Hôte Libanais that provide luxury Bed & Breakfasts. Both the homes and the hosts have been handpicked to ensure that guests experience some of the most beautiful homes combined with Lebanese hospitality. Many of the hosts are from creative backgrounds, which is evident in the balance they strike between tasteful styling and homeliness. The breakfasts are beautifully presented, whilst the inside knowledge you gain from staying with a Lebanese family is priceless.

After a modicum of sleep there are several ways to blow away the cobwebs. Surrounded by mountains, Beirut has easy access to skiing and the resort of Faraya is about 90 minutes away. In the city itself there is the palm-tree lined promenade along the Corniche where you can walk, talk and watch the world go by. Alternatively, if it's culture you seek, the Beirut National Museum has a stunning collection of ancient artefacts, or you can stroll around the numerous archaeological finds scattered discreetly throughout the city.

In fact, this is another outstanding attraction of Beirut: its unassuming attitude combined with a genuine openness that makes visiting this city a constant discovery. I might not have known it for long, but if Beirut were a person, it would definitely be someone I wanted at my dinner party. ■

Information on the Albergo Hotel can be found at albergobeirut.com and on L'Hôte Libanais at hotelibanais.com.

Bmi fly direct to Beirut from London Heathrow. For more information on flights and prices see flybmi.com